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ABSTRACT

Recent controversies over textbooks illustrate objections held by Evangelicals to "secular humanism" in the schools. Educators automatically tend to assume that all religious objections to curricula are clear-cut attempts at censorship. This confrontational attitude on the part of educators can lead to alienation of minority religious groups, resulting in a weakening of the public schools. While the actual judicial decisions in the latest series of textbook controversies failed to support Evangelical thinking, the end result of Evangelical legal activism may have been more positive for their viewpoints, alerting educators, school boards, and textbook publishers to the needs and opinions of a newly vocal and politically active minority. Important aspects of the Evangelical position have received support from a variety of nonevangelical sources. (Twenty-five references are attached.) (SR)

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CONFRONTATION AND ALIENATION:

EDUCATION'S FLAWED RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS TEXTBOOK OBJECTIONS

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CONFRONTATION AND ALIENATION:

EDUCATION'S FLAWED RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS TEXTBOOK OBJECTIONS

The major themes of this paper are as follows:

1. Educators tend to make unexamined responses to any religious objections to curricula, automatically assuming all such objections to be clear-cut attempts at censorship;

2. This confrontational attitude on the part of educators can lead to alienation of minority religious groups, which will result in the weakening of the pluralistic base of our society and specifically, a weakening of the public schools;

3. In the latest series of textbook controversies, the educational establishment has judicially defeated religious objectors. In fact, however, these controversies have contributed to the educational establishment's recognition that the actual textbook objections had merit.

Introduction

One of the hottest controversies to face the public schools in the mid-1980's has had to do with the quality and content of textbooks. With the recognition of increasing pluralism in American society and the increasing strength of U. S. Supreme Court rulings establishing a "wall of separation" between church and state, textbook publishers had excised almost all mention of religion. In fact, in an effort to avoid controversy that might hurt textbook sales, publishers had attempted to remove mention

of any value-laden issues.

The basic philosophy underlying the resulting form of education has been labeled by Evangelicals as "secular humanism," a form of philosophy that does not take any but the vaguest and most popularly accepted stands on morals or ethics and that avoids any mention of God or religion. Evangelicals insisted that there can be no neutrality on religious issues in the schools, if that neutrality was defined as eliminating all mention of religious and ethical issues from the curriculum. They argued that elimination of these controversial issues conveys to students that religion is irrelevant to modern society. Thus, "secularism humanism" is not neutral. It is antithetical to Christianity.

In order to battle the secular humanism in the courts, Evangelical strategies involved presenting the philosophy found in the textbooks as an atheistic "religion" that has been given unfair and unconstitutional precedence over competing idea systems. These court cases have been discussed in detail in an earlier paper (Balajthy, 1987). The judicial acceptance of that argument was generally negative. The courts required evidence of direct attacks on religion rather than the indirect evidences presented by Evangelical plaintiffs. Finding none, they generally dismissed the complaints.

While the actual judicial decisions often failed to support Evangelical thinking, the end result of Evangelical legal activism may have been more positive for their viewpoints. Educators, school boards, and textbook publishers were alerted to the needs and opinions of a newly vocal and politically active

minority.

Important aspects of the Evangelical position also received support from a variety of nonevangelical sources, though educators have often not recognized any relationship between them. Concern over the deteriorating quality of American education and its effects on American society was not limited to Evangelicalism. Several important educational organizations recognized the failure of the schools to teach the traditional values foundational to American democratic society. Several books on the importance of traditional values to education reached the best-seller list.

Is Censorship the Issue?

In an earlier paper, the author (Balajthy, 1987) has demonstrated that the textbook objections in recent court cases have not involved clearcut censorship issues. Censorship involves the use of power by an institution to exclude ideas and materials. Fewer points of view would be included in the curriculum when censorship occurs.

In the Mozert et al. decision (1986), the opposite held true. Parents complaining about textbooks protested the school district's refusal to allow alternative methods--that is, to place more ideas in the curriculum. Underhill (1987), in an article describing a somewhat similar case in Alabama, noted the ironies in who was arguing for what:

Before lapsing into hysteria and ringing alarms

about facism, people...should look again. It was the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]--PAW [People for the American Way--a lobby group set up by TV sitcom producer Norman Lear and others as an alternative to the Moral Majority] defense team that joined with the attorneys for the state in opposing liberal tenets: Freedom of speech and open debate of all views. They argued in effect, that a teacher with religious convictions must curb his or her speech as a condition of employment (p. 440).

Yet, despite the clear complexities, educators have insisted on interpreting these court cases as simple attempts to censor teachers and textbooks. The editors of a recent issue of the journal of the Virginia Association of Teachers of English devoted to school book controversies noted the "attitude of smug superiority, intellectual snobbishness, and hostile defensiveness" (1986, p. 4) that educators too often adopt.

One looks in vain at writings of leading experts on school textbook issues for any attempt to understand both sides of the issues. Burress, past chair of the Committee Against Censorship of the National Council of Teachers of English, for example, employed the common stereotype of Evangelical dissenters as anti-intellectual and labeled moral objections to textbooks as dangerous "irrational reactions" (1986, p. 79).

Edward Jenkinson, a leading scholar on textbook censorship and author of Phi Delta Kappa's The Schoolbook Protest Movement (1986) as well as Secular Humanism: In Search of a Definition (1986), likewise misunderstands the concerns of the protesters,

dismissing them as revealing "a seemingly intense dislike and distrust of literature" and insisting that they believe "that the actions, thoughts, and beliefs of any character in any story or poem should coincide with [their] own religious beliefs" (1987, p. 448), a clear oversimplification of the issues. Tyson-Bernstein (1987), in a publication of the American Federation of Teachers, called Evangelicals "dangerously totalitarian... unwilling to admit that Protestantism is not the official religion of the United States"--apparently unaware that Evangelicals have long advocated separation of church and state at least in part because of their minority status and lack of social and political influence.

Consequences of Educators' Reactions Against "Censorship"

Some educators dismiss the concerns of Evangelical parents by pointing to their small numbers and arguing that a minority group should not be allowed to influence educational policies for the majority.

Yet, can the public schools afford to disenfranchise the Evangelical population? Glenn (1987) pointed out that this minority group is different from dissenting religious groups of the past:

> These parents are not new immigrants bring with them what could be dismissed as Old World ideas about religious education. They are Americans born and bred, living very normal lives, sharing the religious

convictions of the majority of Americans, and differing only in the conclusions that they draw from these convictions (p. 451).

For years it was assumed by sociologists that groups such as Evangelicals that held traditional Christian religious views were fragmented and declining in number. This so-called "secularization model," that society is becoming increasingly secular and less religious, has been discarded by sociology (Johnson, 1985) since the publication of Kelley's Why Conservative Churches Are Growing in 1972. 21% of the American population is Evangelical (Carroll, Johnson, & Marty, 1979) and 48% of American Protestants report that they interpret the Bible literally.

Perhaps even more relevant than actual numbers is the increased unity of purpose and political awareness of this religious group. Timothy Smith, professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, has studied the Evangelical movement and found "almost no expression of sectarian rivalry" (p. 10) that characterized it a century ago (1986). Evangelicals, with a twentieth century heritage of political non-involvement and strong advocacy of the separation of church and state (especially among Baptists), have re-entered the political arena partially as a result of outrage over the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court abortion decision.

Reichley (1985) has suggested that events of the 1960's and 1970's had set the stage for increased Evangelical political involvement. Previously modernism had represented "rising national prosperity, with burgeoning government programs to help

the sick and the elderly and the poor, with increased personal freedom and opportunities for travel and awareness of a wide world" (p. 316). As the Supreme Court made its controversial decision, modernism was instead associated with Viet Nam, Watergate, racial riots, divorce, violent crime, rising alcoholism and drug addiction, and breakdown of traditional family units. The Evangelical community, convinced that their continued existence depended on democracy for survival and prosperity, concluded that the society might not survive increased secularism.

These concerns for the welfare of American society extended far beyond the ranks of Evangelicalism. A nationwide survey by the National Opinion Research Center on social issues found predominantly conservative responses by nonevangelical religious groups as well. 77% of Methodists, 75% of Lutherans, 72% of Presbyterians, 70% of Catholics, 48% of Episcopalians, and 37% of Jews indicated conservative leanings. The 1988 election campaigns were influenced heavily by the perception that the American public was looking for conservative leadership.

What happens when a significant minority group feels disenfranchised as far as public schooling is concerned? Glenn (1987) reported that between 1970 and 1985, K-8 private school enrollment rose by 6% at a time when the school-age population caused enrollment in public schools--so-called "government schools" to their critics--to decline by 17%. Wuthnow (1984) estimated a 47% growth in Christian schools and 95% increase in enrollment between 1971 and 1978. Hunter (1985) reported that

Christian schools now number up to 18,000, with 2.5 million children enrolled. It is apparent that a cavalier "My way or the highway" policy by public school educators has led dissatisfied parents to simply withdraw their children from the schools (Ballweg, 1980).

Effects on public schools are felt in other ways, as well. In his description of a textbook controversy in a Virginia county school district, Raines (1986) describes how an Evangelical challenge to a literature textbook series was defeated in court. But unexpected results arose from the dissatisfaction of parents:

> The local contribution to public school budgets decreased in the period...from an average position among school divisions in Virginia to the next to last position. The average teacher's salary in [the county] decreased in the period...from a slightly above average position among school divisions in Virginia to the next to last position. Other manifestations [included] the lowered morale of the teaching staff, the inability to attract top quality replacement teachers, the gradual loss of key instructional persons, the gradual reduction in the number of supervisory positions, and, worst of all, the erosion of public confidence in the schools (p. 44).

What Is the Present Status of the Major Court Cases, and Their Long-Term Implications?

The major court cases in both Alabama and Tennessee which challenged the dominance of secular humanism in school textbooks were both lost by the plaintiffs in 1988. In his earlier paper, the author (1987) indicated that these cases had been designed primarily as attempts to put pressure on a public school system that is increasingly perceived as failing to provide children an ethical foundation necessary to democratic life. In 1988, such criticism of the public schools--for which the Evangelical parents in these cases were almost universally vilified by the professional educational establishment and by the media--has now become commonplace, and educational institutions and textbook publishers are rapidly moving to address the problem by becoming more open to inclusion of controversy, western democratic ideals, and religion.

An enlightened citizenship must be aware of the problems that society faces. Many of these problems involve controversies, and the solutions to the problems present even more controversy. Diane Ravitch, a specialist in Educational History at Teachers College of Columbia University, has criticized basal readers for this distortion:

> In their saccharine world, no one suffers unjustly, no one is evil, no one is poor or unemployed, women and minorities are depicted as leaders and achievers in every field. This creates an unrealistic image of a society where all battles are in the past, where

racism is history, and where women and minorities have nothing left to strive for (1987, p. 46).

Paul Gagnon, a historian at the University of Massachusetts, has argued in an American Federation of Teachers Publication, that an increased value must be placed by schools on the foundations of American and Western history,

> because [Western civilization] has produced liberal democracy and many of the moral values that sustain it. This is not to say that no other civilization was capable of doing so, but it was in fact the West that did it, and we need to know how (1987, p. 20).

Gagnon goes on to draw a connection between the concerns of many religious dissidents and the public school curriculum:

> The ideas and history of democracy, and the vision of democracy, are not intelligible without a prior grasp of the life and ideas of Greece and Rome, Judaism and Christianity, Islam and Christendom in the Middle Ages, feudalism, the Renaissance and the Reformation, absolutism, the English Revolution, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the comparative experiences of Europe and the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries (p. 20).

These sentiments found national recognition beyond the educational establishment with the publication of Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind (1987) and E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987). The

American Federation of Teachers (1987) has published Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles, a statement of principles for teaching democratic values. This includes a statement that students must be taught about "the ancient Jews and Christians--whose ethical beliefs gave rise to democratic thought" (p. 15), and that the "values clarification" approach give way to a study of democratic moral values as found in history, literature, philosophy, and biography.

The concerns specifically about the absence of religious values in textbooks has also had some preliminary impact on publishers. Fiske (1987) has quoted Samuel Gesumaria, an editor with Macmillan Publishers, as saying, "We're hearing enough about religion in the textbooks. The public wants to see it" (p. 22). William Honig, superintendent of the California schools, has indicated that California will demand a reasonable inclusion of religion in its history textbooks (1987).

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